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# How institutional doxa shapes access to higher education through framings of ‘potential’

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## Abstract

Access to higher education is a global concern due to its dual role in transforming individual lives and value for global economic systems. However, pre-entry interventions to improve access often make comparatively little impact on who attends certain types of universities. Drawing upon a study that examined policy and practice relating to access to higher education conducted in 2016–2017 in England, this article furthers a theoretical discussion relating to the role institutional norms play in maintaining this status quo and why inequities endure especially in elite universities. In doing so, it highlights how institutional doxa can illuminate how taken-for-granted ideals shape policy and practice. This article theorises that institutional doxa shapes notions of who is seen as having ‘potential’, examines why doxic positions in relation to ‘potential’ endure and are rarely impacted by practices. This theorisation offers an important contribution to research on access to higher education as by foregrounding the central role played by these assumptions within marketised higher education systems this enables them to be challenged and deconstructed in order to effect meaningful progress on issues of access to higher education.

## Keywords

education policy, higher education, doxa, Bourdieu, access to higher education

## Introduction

Access to higher education is an important global issue due to both its ability to transform the lives of individuals and the impact on national and global economies (Atherton et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2017) and has been central to the political discourse in the United Kingdom for over 50 years (Stevens, 2004). Over this time, there has been much debate within government, public discourse

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and universities themselves as to the purpose of higher education and who should benefit from it. Higher education has also been framed as a way of improving an individual's life chances. However, to do so requires work to promote and facilitate access from under-represented groups in particular those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and certain ethnicities. Within England and Wales, this work often falls under the banner of 'widening participation'. Despite these conscious efforts to widen access, this work is often in tension with assumptions and ideologies as to who can and should benefit from higher education. This is often based on prior attainment or understandings of what a potential student might look like for a particular university.

Alongside these ideologies, the increased marketisation of higher education promotes the idea of choice (McCaig, 2018). These choices are constrained by the barriers to entry in terms of entry requirements and also by the potential risks of feeling like 'a fish out of water' (Reay et al., 2010). This is amplified for those students moving across class, ethnic and in some cases, geographical boundaries. Universities rarely problematise this as their transformative power is often seen as a benefit. Therefore, students adapting to fit in appears logical to universities. However, this assumption that students should adapt fitting in with norms and expectations of institutions can cause issues within a system that rewards high retention rates within its regulatory frameworks and institutional rankings. Improved performance within these metrics results in greater market value. Therefore, this assumption can result in institutions looking for more students that mirror their successful graduates of the past. Consequently, who each university frames as a being a potential student can shape who applies, who gains entry and can often lead to the reproduction of existing inequalities of access.

Who is seen as a potential student and what success looks during and beyond a course of study are shaped by institutional norms which can be based on measures such as prior attainment or graduate outcomes but also on markers within applications such as future occupational aspirations and extracurricular interests. These markers are not neutral and are often shaped by the socioeconomic background of potential future students (Archer et al., 2014). Whilst different universities may have particular values and assumptions, these assumptions often transcend individual institutions, created shared understandings across the higher education sector on how to identify this potential. Whilst rates of participation in England have increased across the higher education sector, data shows that relative gaps in participation between groups have remained constant (UCAS, 2017). Furthermore, the types of universities attended have become more stratified with selective universities dominated by middle-class entrants (Reay et al., 2005). This article examines the way in which institutions interpret and enact national policy using the concept of institutional doxa (Davey, 2012) to highlight how these norms can permeate within and beyond institutions and can shape action even when individual actors are not aware of them. Through an examination of policy and practices related to access to higher education in England, this article will explore the role the way in which doxic positions shape understandings, specifically in terms of who is framed as having 'potential' to benefit from their support. Whilst focusing on a national context, the theorisation of the role on institutional doxa in shaping institutional policy and practices likely has global resonance to anyone researching or working within marketised higher education systems.

## Examining structural issues in higher education

Whilst structures may not be physical in nature, they have physical manifestations in the form of rules, policies and other documents with these structuring devices shaping but not determining action (Archer, 1995). Governments act as one type of structure that shapes action through legislation and acts of parliament. Similarly, the structuring power of each university is manifest within

its own policy documents. These can be thought of shaped by what Sarah Ahmed (2012: 25) terms as ‘ways of doing things that seem natural’. Therefore, knowledge of these structures that shape action can be gained through analysing both types of document.

One of the key policy documents relating to access to higher education in the English context in 2016–2017 were access agreements. The 2004 *Higher Education Act* set out the requirement for institutions in England to create plans<sup>1</sup> which include provision for the promotion of ‘equality of opportunity in connection with access to higher education’ (2004: 16). Each university published these on their websites and a copy was lodged with the regulator (Office for Students, 2021). These documents provide a useful point of comparison as each university uses them to set out their positions and plans on many key issues such as funding, targets and provision to address issues of access to higher education. However, the annual cycle of production of access agreements meant that there was often a disconnect between these and practices. For example, the 2016–2017 agreements were approved by the regulator in early 2015. Therefore, understanding this temporal distinction between policy and practice was important. This often meant that there was a disconnect in who is writing and enacting policy. Furthermore, this time gap also can act to misalign institutional positions with current national positions. Consequently, detail on what is planned can be vague or open to later interpretation in practice with phrases such as ‘development of subject specific activity’, ‘provision of targeted support for students with additional support needs’ or ‘programme of activity with students’ being emblematic of this. This creates scope for institutional power to influence both what is said but also how it is later operationalised.

## Exploring access to higher education policies and practices

This article draws upon data from a study conducted in the 2016–2017 which examined the access to higher education policy and practices across two contrasting types of universities in England (AUTHOR 2019). It was the first in-depth examination of the relationship between policy and practitioners in England and was concerned with examining both the differences between policies between universities and the role of practitioners in policy enactment. The first phase of the study examined five matched pairs of universities in five cities in England. Each pair consisted of a pre-92 university and a post-92 institution. These institutions types are distinctly different in terms of economic resources, teaching metrics, research activity, entry requirements and student mix (Boliver, 2015). These two types of institution are also symbolic of the different forms of higher education in England with the post-92 institutions being designated as universities after the massification of higher education in England. Broadly, pre-92 universities have higher academic entry requirements, greater research budgets and include the Russell Group, a mission group of 24 self-styled elite universities. In contrast, post-92 universities are often more heavily oriented to teaching and have more lenient entry requirements for most courses. Within this article, they will be referred to as elite and recruitment focused.

For each university, their access agreements were analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2003). The CDA framework that was used examined a range of elements of the texts but in relation to developing an understanding of ‘potential’, assumption and legitimisation were the key elements in the analysis. Assumptions relate to the ideological work being done in the access agreements and legitimisation was particularly evident through the use of rationalisation and the authority of traditions set out in the narratives of the access agreements. Access agreements were also an interesting focus for this analysis as they are usually collaboratively authored. Therefore, the discourses within them reified the ongoing interactions between different policy actors in institutions and were ‘the reconciliation of competing ideas and interests, compromises and trade-offs’

(Forrester and Garratt, 2016: 6). As such, they were useful as a point of comparison between institutions as a measure of intentions as policy only offers a partial picture of what goes on and one of the key concerns in designing the study was to capture the gap between ‘words and deeds’ (Ahmed, 2007: 590). The study also included a second phase. This was informed by the analysis of the access agreements to inform semi-structured interviews with sixteen practitioners who delivered pre-entry access to higher education work. The purpose of the interviews was to examine the relationships between those policy and practice. These explored issues such as personal biography, targeting, aspirations, relationship to policy and professional development. The study received ethical approval from Staffordshire University Faculty of Business, Education and Law ethics committee and followed BERA Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2011). It should also be noted that the specific institutions and practitioners have not been identified beyond their institutional types (elite or recruitment focused) in this article to maintain confidentiality.

## The structure-agency problem in higher education institutions

Whilst this article focuses upon the role of institutional doxa in shaping policy and practices, it is important to situate this within a wider theoretical framework. The study itself drew upon Margaret Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic approach, taking structure and agency as temporally distinct emergent properties of social systems. Given the time gaps between policy development and enactment, this is an important consideration. This theoretical framework also allowed for the exploration of policy and practice as interrelated but analytically distinct without falling into the traps of conflation that other theoretical approaches are subject to. The consideration of this within the theoretical framework is important as whilst practitioners work within constraints set by the policies and institutions which may have been crafted by different actors and are also temporally distinct.

Whilst structures can shape action, considering them as analytically distinct allows agents to be considered to possess different properties. Through this analytical dualism, previous actions can shape structures, but these structures do not fully constrain future action (Archer, 2003). This approach differs from the Bourdieusian perspective that is often used within education research (e.g. Archer et al., 2003; Ingram, 2018; Reay et al., 2005). Bourdieu argued that social structures predate the individual and reflexive action only takes place in moments of crisis (Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1992). This assumes therefore that individuals are ‘predisposed towards certain ways of behaving’ (Reay, 2004: 433). Critics of Bourdieu’s work on habitus have argued that whilst there is too little emphasis on agency, this may have been a product of the time given that since his writings, society has become decreasingly arranged by traditional family and community ties (Sweetman, 2003). In contrast, Archer positions individuals as reflexive agents. Archer states that:

The subjective powers of reflexivity mediate the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action and are thus indispensable to explaining social outcomes.

(Archer, 2007: 5)

Here, she argued that individuals can resist structural and cultural powers and are thus not determined by circumstance to the extent which is assumed by Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. This deterministic reading has been argued against and the generative role of habitus has been emphasised by Burke et al. (2013) who argued for a responsiveness of habitus to external factors. Yet individuals own agency still seems to be given too little weight. Similarly, Archer (2007) argued that

even in his writings about reflexivity, Bourdieu privileged structure over agency and did not afford them equal roles. This study however noted institutions and individuals both play important roles in shaping practices. This also aligned with the conceptualisation of policy as an influencer, as opposed to a determinant of action (Ball, 1993).

Notwithstanding, there are similarities between Archer's and Bourdieu's positions. Previously scholars have looked at ways to reconcile their positions (e.g. Adams, 2006; Sayer, 2010). Archer argues against this reconciliation and that her position is less deterministic than Bourdieu's. She still positions individuals as being agents whose actions are shaped in part by constraints and enablements. Therefore, the theoretical position assumed within this study was that agents possess or can develop reflexivity. They can to some extent decide whether or not to adopt institutional norms or to resist their adoption. Bourdieu's notion of habitus offers a limited capacity for individuals to act based on their own concerns. Whilst I acknowledge the generative qualities of habitus, Archer's centralising of agency is more appropriate in theorising varied practices within the same institutions. However, this is not to say that individuals are not constrained by objective circumstances but that not all action is heavily shaped by an individual's habitus as Bourdieu contends. Archer's emphasis on the role played by agentic reflexivity is more valuable in the context of this study for making sense of the policy-practice relationship. As Reay has argued, a problem within the concept of habitus is the focus on 'pre-reflexive dimensions of action' (Reay, 2004: 437). Bourdieu argued that reflexivity is a property that only exists for certain individuals and is restricted to times of crises (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This position has limitations in understanding human action. However, in contrast, Doxa, another of Bourdieu's concepts is valuable in the university context for understanding the role of structures in shaping action and appears to be compatible with the overall theoretical argument relating to the relationship between structure and agency in the context of higher education access policy enactment.

## Understanding practices using institutional doxa

Whilst some of Bourdieu's conceptual ideas are limited in their ability to account for individual reflexivity, the concept of doxa appears to allow for this and resonated with how access to higher education practices appear to be enacted within universities. Doxa, framed as 'a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view' (Bourdieu, 1998 [2001]: 57) encapsulated the ways in which ideological positions of universities appeared to be manifest in access agreements. These taken-for-granted ideas underpin discourses of what excellence looks like, the reasons for non-participation and the role universities play in improving access. Doxa been further developed as a concept by Gayna Davey (2012: 511) into the notion of institutional doxa. Her study explored how university choices in a fee paying sixth form are shaped. In that context, she talks of doxa creating a 'taste for particular educational choices'. Therefore, institutional doxa can be seen as a taken-for-granted sense of what is done, transcending individuals. In relation to access to higher education, this offers the capacity for transgressions of individual practitioners or departments contra to institutional missions but without altering the taken-for-granted sense of what matters. As one practitioner working in a recruitment focused institution stated: 'I don't always fit with the institutional line'.

This universal point of view shaping action is unlike habitus generative nature. To further the argument for why institutional doxa is a better fit, it is important to outline the limitations of using institutional habitus in this context.

Bourdieu conceptualises habitus as 'generative principles of distinct and different practices - what the worker eats, and especially how he eats it' (Bourdieu, 1998 [2001]: 8). He elaborates this

by stating habitus also creates classificatory schemes, principles of classification, principles of vision and division, different tastes. It could be argued that in many ways the actions of widening participation practitioners could be seen to be shaped by habitus. Individual practices can and do evolve over time and are often influenced by those they work with. It has also been used in education and the ideas of an institutional habitus specifically have been used to explore how structural forces shape the actions of individuals within institutions such as secondary schools. Diane Reay (1998) makes a compelling case for the role of an institutional habitus in shaping university choices made by young people in secondary schools. Other researchers such as Nicola Ingram (2009) have also operationalised this concept within their work. Within her work, Ingram (2009: 432) argues that:

[institutional habitus] structures and is structured by its interactions with social agents within its field and is a product of history, whilst being simultaneously produced by the present.

Similarly, Reay (1998) highlights the fact that institutional habitus can mediate individuals' behaviours and suggests that institutional habitus can be subject to change although is less malleable than individual habitus. In building upon this, Ingram (2009) further argues that in schools, institutional habitus acts to reinforce social norms and can mediate the habitus of individuals.

However, I argue that institutional habitus is less appropriate in a university context. Both Reay (1998) and Ingram (2009) studies focused on secondary schools. Whilst I would agree there is often much commonality between secondary schools and universities due to their nature as educational institutions, there is one factor that is very different, that of scale. Within a large organisation, institutional habitus appears to assume too strong an association between individuals in a heterogeneous community. Whilst there is the capacity for this in the teams who conduct pre-entry access work, the work done by practitioners is often highly autonomous and thus despite spaces within which collective conversations may shape work, there is still an individual capacity to act reflexively.

Secondly, from an ontological perspective, institutional habitus seems to be overly deterministic of action and does not allow sufficient scope for individual reflexivity that Archer (2007) argues for and that I believe underpins human action. In his critique of institutional habitus, Atkinson (2011) highlights the lack of consideration for those teachers or lecturers who struggle against a school's vision. For me, this is only half the issue. In a large organisation, the capacity for those at the bottom of institutional hierarchies to drive change is often limited, even if they have more in-depth knowledge about a policy area; therefore, institutional doxa is more appropriate in this context. Therefore, when practices are shaped by principles but have little role in shaping those principles then institutional doxa is more appropriate. This allows for the consideration of the reflexive action of agents enacting policy. I am not necessarily arguing against the existence of institutional habitus; certainly, in previous studies of schools, it seems to offer a useful frame of analysis (Ingram, 2009; Reay, 1998). However, in the context of large universities, it is not an appropriate concept to use due to their diffuse nature and the weaker social relations that exist within them.

To further explore this point, this article returns to the definition of habitus as 'generative principles of distinct and different practices' (Bourdieu, 1998 [2001]: 8). It is this use of generative that is also central to arguing for the value of institutional doxa over institutional habitus in this context. There is little evidence that the practitioners are shaping the principles that are guiding them. As one participant in a recruitment focused institution stated:



I was never involved in decision making at any level. It was like here's the funding, here's the project, you go and deliver the project.

Part of [Burke et al. \(2013: 26\)](#) defence of the concept of institutional habitus rests on the argument that 'habitus are permeable and responsive to what is going on around them'. I would argue that in the case for policy focused on access to higher education, it is often *imposed upon* opposed to *responsive to* the work taking place within an institution. Therefore, the defining force in these agreements was not through institutional habitus as a set of norms and dispositions but by taken for granted, unquestioned truths attestable to an institutional doxa. [Bourdieu \(1990 \[2014\]\)](#) also highlighted how doxa shapes experience by attuning individuals to associate the same meaning with the same sign. To explore this further idea of the meaning attributed to a specific sign in relation to access, the article now examines the notion of 'potential'.

## Doxic framings of 'potential'

'Potential', in relation to higher education can be thought of both in terms of who has potential and who might be a potential future student. This idea of potential is underpinned by a number of competing interests: interests at a national level, interests at an institutional level and interests at an individual student level. All of these interests influence the varied framings of 'potential' by individual universities. This discourse has a lineage in English higher education policy dating back more than 50 years to the Robbins report. This stated that 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' ([The Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 8](#)). Later, the Dearing report broadened this to code ability and attainment into the notion of 'intellectual potential':

...encourage and enable all students - whether they demonstrate the highest intellectual potential or whether they have struggled to reach the threshold of higher education - to achieve beyond their expectations.

([National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997: 7](#))

A further shift was evident in the 2003 White paper which foregrounded the need to 'make sure that potential is recognized and fostered wherever it is found' ([Department for Education and Skills, 2003: 67](#)). Therefore, potential is often framed as an innate quality that an individual either possesses or lacks and encodes nebulous ideas of attainment, ability and intellect within it which were never specifically defined. More recently, the *National Strategy for Access and Student Success* was based on the premise that:

all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed, on a course and in an institution that best fit their potential, needs and ambitions for employment or further study.

([HEFCE and OFFA, 2014: 7](#))

Therefore, despite changes in government, the notion of 'potential' or 'talent' recurs as a central enduring concern and is also open to interpretation.

Competing within national and global markets requires institutions to ensure they perform well in league tables. Currently there are twenty global rankings including the three most quoted Times



Higher Education (THE), Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU). There are also 150 national ones including the Complete University Guide, Guardian and Sunday Times in the United Kingdom. Therefore, competing on these global stages has been seen by some institutions to be more important than their previous roles as civic universities (Hazelkorn, 2018). Therefore, institutional policy is framed through the metrics that matter to league table positions (Greenbank, 2006). One of these key metrics is entry tariff. Consequently, to meet both access targets and stay competitive, elite institutions tend to focus on the highest attaining students from under-represented backgrounds. In this context, potential then becomes potential for the institution to maintain its legitimacy. This is a position of power it needs to maintain to continue to attract students and retain its status in the market. This is also becoming increasingly problematic in some more recruitment focused institutions through attempts to strategically increase their market positioning following the changes to student number controls in order to compete alongside higher status institutions (McCaig and Taylor, 2017). As a result, this notion of ‘potential’ is not only rooted in ideas of who deserves to participate in higher education but in what makes a globally successful higher education institution.

### Differing meanings of ‘potential’

In the 2016–2017 access agreements, the way in which types of universities used the term ‘potential’ was distinct. The implementation of access to higher education policy within autonomous institutions meant that the focus was likely to be driven by the underlying institutional ideologies. With vague framings in national policy, they have the power to shape its interpretation. Therefore, the discourse of ‘potential’ was repurposed in terms of who each university believed to have ‘potential’. Examining this through the lens of institutional doxa, possessing the power to set institutional policy meant that national policy could be shifted based on doxic assumptions to fit local agendas. Therefore, being able to identify ‘potential’ and framing individuals as potential students overlap. Furthermore, it was often unclear as to what role the institution felt they had in developing potential or merely identifying it. It can be seen from one recruitment focused university’s framing that schools and colleges play a crucial part in this:

Going forward the University is forging stronger relationships with key partner schools and colleges, and as part of these partnerships will be offering targeted advice and guidance to potential students from a widening participation background.

This collaborative approach to identifying ‘potential’ occurred in both types of universities. The elite university in the same city also focused on students who had been ‘...identified by their school and teachers as having the intellectual potential to succeed...’. The problems of a nebulous notion of ‘potential’ and multiple actors being involved in identifying these students meant that this can lead to reproducing the types of students already seen in those institutions. Where previously elite and recruitment focused institutions would have worked in local partnerships for all students during the early 2000s, since 2012, the focus of elite institutions has been primarily on those students who were already likely to become future students of their institutions (McCaig, 2015). The reasons for this are complex and not solely due to individual universities actions but through the relationships, assumptions and other pressures that underpin engagement in this agenda across the education sector included the market forces previously highlighted. These factors all shape the dominant point of view.

Where multiple institutions are targeting individual schools, who goes where has the potential to become a reductive choice; those already excelling being pushed towards elite institutions and the rest towards recruitment focused institutions. For those not deemed to have ‘potential’, this may mean not being offered support to explore higher education routes.

The policy positions of individual universities can further reproduce this. For example, one elite institution in the study focused on ‘an outreach programme designed to identify and nurture academic talent’ whilst another emphasised how they ‘attract students of high ability and potential’ and as one participant from an elite university stated:

when we are engaging with the teachers we make it very clear that the students we are particularly interested in are the gifted and talented.

However, data shows that academic attainment is both classed and raced ([Department for Education, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d](#)) and that despite expansion of the higher education sector, class inequalities in access to higher education endure ([Boliver, 2011](#)).

Consequently, by overlaying access to higher education with the entry requirements to become a future student, many of the elite universities shift the focus of potential into framings such as the ‘best and brightest’ or ‘Gifted and talented’ with a lack of acknowledgement for the structural inequalities that underpin these concepts. More problematic still is how these students are defined. Whilst ‘Gifted and talented’ has been used within access policy since at least 1997, it was never clearly defined ([Morris et al., 2005](#)). Data also suggests race, ethnicity and socioeconomic factors play a significant role in formal exam performance ([Andrews et al., 2017](#)) and progression to higher education ([Department for Education, 2017a](#)) hence grades may not be indicative of potential, yet many selective institutions are continuing to frame potential in exactly these terms ([AUTHOR 2017](#)). Yet again this is shaped by the dominant point of view thus supporting the value of institutional doxa in understanding how values shape policy and practices.

There are two possible reasons for exam grades being the yardstick for potential. Firstly, policy actors involved in writing the access agreements could be unaware of the ways in which formal academic success is constrained by inequality, assuming that attainment is an objective measure of potential. Secondly, that maintaining inequality is important to maintain the institution’s privileged position ([Young, 1990](#)). Whilst this may be a view held by some policy actors and would align with the pressures of marketisation, the few practitioners involved in writing access agreements within the study did not seem to espouse exclusionary views. However, these documents are written and approved by committees influenced by institutional norms. One participant in a recruitment focused institution spoke of how there were so many demands in policy that it was hard to work out what they had the capacity to do.

... there’s a big discussion across university institutions as to whether or not it’s our responsibility to raise attainment. That’s the responsibility of schools and colleges, or is it?

However, relying on schools to develop ‘potential’ and university’s to simply find that ‘potential’ is unlikely to widen participation especially given the disparities in attainment for groups under-represented in higher education ([Department for Education, 2017b](#)). This is likely to even more problematic in elite institutions where entry is contingent in high academic attainment.

This issue of capacity, remit and the market pressures can result in ideas of ‘potential’ then acting as norms which become unquestioned and clearly shaped by the doxic positions of each university. In delineating a group as deserving of support for accessing higher education, universities also

demarcate those who it does not see as deserving. In some cases, this is a positive outcome as it directs resources at those who most need the support to access higher education. In others, it limits who can benefit based on doxic assumptions. This is not to say that elite higher education is the best or only route to success; however, the symbolic capital associated with a degree from a selective institution should not be underestimated. Whilst ‘potential’ is narrowly framed by these institutions in a way that privileges individuals who are likely to have had certain early advantages, highlighting this as problematic is important. The effects of this have been well documented in the Paired Peers project which compared undergraduate students from similar backgrounds in a pair of elite and recruitment focused institutions and more recently followed them into employment (Bathmaker et al., 2016). Therefore, the way institutional doxa shapes who is framed as having ‘potential’ matters.

## When ‘potential’ and potential student become entangled

These doxic assumptions of who has ‘potential’ shape every aspect of pre-entry work. Several institutions highlighted the Realising Opportunities programme in their access agreements. This is a collaborative programme focused on improving access to 15 elite, research-intensive universities. One elite university’s access agreement in this study stated that Realising Opportunities enables participants ‘...to demonstrate their potential to succeed at a research-intensive university’. Problematically, to participate in this programme in 2016–2017, applicants had to have eight A\*-C grade GCSEs<sup>2</sup> with at least five A or A\* grades<sup>3</sup> in addition to meeting two other criteria such as being from a low participation neighbourhood, eligible for free school meals or first in the family to attend university. Furthermore, the students have to be attending an eligible state school as designated by performance in attainment below the national average (Realising Opportunities, n.d.). This assumption therefore of who has the potential to succeed at elite universities therefore narrows who can be supported to gain access, thus not widening the net but ‘cream skimming’ (McCaig and Adnett, 2009) those who that satisfy institutional targets. This is also shaped by the doxic assumptions of what ‘potential’ is.

In practice, this was even more problematic. One practitioner in an elite university highlighted how oversubscribed their scheme was, meaning those who gained entry to the programme had ‘seven or eight As or A\*s at GCSE’ far in excess of the advertised five A’s meaning even those framed as having ‘potential’ were unable to participate. This is an issue when considered in terms of attainment inequalities. Whilst 70.3% of students achieved A\*-C grades at GCSE in English and Maths in 2015, this compared to 43.1% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>4</sup> (Department for Education, 2017c: 19). Therefore, when selection for interventions is based on future potential as measured in past academic ability, this is likely to disproportionately exclude the most disadvantaged students. Attainment as a predictor of ‘potential’ is also disputed. Education datalab (2015) analysed school attainment progress and found a heterogeneous range of trajectories. Despite this evidence, the doxic notion of ‘potential’ runs through every element of policy and practice in defining who is targeted and who is seen as worthy of support.

## Does institutional doxa hold up in practice?

This issue of ‘potential’ can also be seen to influence practices to some extent but there was also significant evidence of resistance to these ideas by practitioners within the study. This tension between what is said in policy and what is done in practice is a reflexive process, something institutional doxa accommodates. However, whilst Greenbank (2006) in his study of widening

participation policy identified institutional culture as being key to how political and economic positions were mediated into institutional policy, I propose an alternative way of thinking about how practices are shaped. Within institutions, there was commonality in approaches yet also clear variations between individuals in the same institution. This can be theorised through combining together Iris Marion Young's (1990) conception of oppression with institutional doxa (Davey, 2012).

Young (1990: 41) argued that oppression is not simply created by the intentional exercising of power but through 'the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society' and is exercised through 'unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules'. This notion of unquestioned norms resonates with idea institutional doxa (Davey, 2012). Institutional doxa allows for the understanding of how institutional power shapes practices based on ideological positions and values whilst still maintaining the capacity for reflexive action. There was sufficient variation in the narratives of the practitioners to suggest that institutional positions were not accepted uncritically and that there was the capacity for resistance (AUTHOR 2021). In adopting this framing, it can be seen how value assumptions drive practice but can also be resisted and challenged by practitioners. For example, some practitioners accepted their institutional targeting process unquestioningly. One elite university practitioner was quite clear that they were '... trying to get [their] students to a Russell group university' which came with certain restrictions on who they should be working with. In contrast, another recruitment focused university practitioner was frustrated because she felt that policy makers 'don't know what [finding these students] means on the ground'.

Consequently, institutional doxa is a productive way of understanding how values and assumptions influence but do not completely determine practices. As I have argued elsewhere, the strength of conformity to institutional norms or transgression from these norms can be influenced by many factors (AUTHOR 2021). These include education, personal experience and autonomy of the practitioner's role in the institution. However, managing behaviour to 'fit in' is something that individuals in teams are likely to do (Sayer, 2011) and institutional doxa can be seen to shape certain actions as 'norms'. These norms are likely to relate back to the way 'potential' is conceptualised or approaches to targeting, thus determining who benefits from pre-entry work. The ability to resist this doxa appeared to be greater in more dispersed teams. Within the study, the role of institutional doxa seemed stronger in two institutions in the study. One of these teams was small and worked closely together. Another was larger but with a number of less experienced staff who were likely to be more reliant on colleagues to develop their practices, limiting the ability they had to transgress from institutional norms. In teams that were larger, more dispersed or with more autonomous roles, the effect seemed less prominent. Another factor that also seemed evident from the interviews was the role networking beyond an institution could mitigate against accepting institutional norms, potentially diluting the influence of institutional doxa on individual's understandings that underpin access work.

## Conclusions

Advancing this understanding of how policy and practices are shaped is important in allowing us to see why some taken-for-granted ideas are so pervasive and enduring. I argue that understanding how pervasive these ideologies are helps us consider the challenge of counteracting them. Resistance at the margins within practice and even resistance by individual policy actors will not change the tide. If we consider these policies to be shaped by doxic assumptions opposed to the generative

mechanisms of habitus, it is unlikely that the actions of practitioners will change institutional constructions of who the 'potential' students of the future are.

This repeated framing of only those with higher attainment being suitable targets means that those who do not meet these criteria are either excluded from participating physically or psychologically by not being deemed suitable for higher education. This is particularly problematic where geography further limits the targets of pre-entry interventions. For some remote students, the combination of who is targeted by their local university and their own circumstances may make access to the support they might need to access university out of their reach. Therefore, the role of institutional doxa in shaping not only local practices but also understandings of who university is for cannot be understated. After all, in a national and global context the impact of those goes far beyond individual universities. Whilst generalisations from the empirical data from this study should be cautioned against due to its narrow focus on ten institutions and sixteen practitioner interviews, I argue that the theoretical insights this article offer are likely to resonate with other institutions especially when they are operating in the same or similar marketised environments.

Where elite institutions privilege those who have attained highly in early schooling, we can see that they are unlikely to target those students who most need access interventions. Especially when we consider that the links between low levels of attainment in primary school and disadvantage are well documented and that linear trajectories of academic progress have been brought into question ([Education datalab, 2015](#); [Sammons et al., 2014](#)). Consequently, if doxic assumptions of how future potential students are identified continue to inform access efforts, especially in elite institutions, then we may be severely limiting the effectiveness of these interventions. If long-term access to higher education work is to be successful, we then need to find ways to challenge these doxic assumptions. This is a challenge as it requires questioning the position of the privileged as these assumptions in many cases are the basis of their own sense of self. These issues run far deeper and are embedded in the core ideals that underpin stratified systems of both higher education specifically and education more generally; The notion that there are individuals who have more right to benefit from education and the fact that this 'potential' is something innate. Based on this, any work to widen access is likely to be constrained by the doxic beliefs that shape who is seen to have 'potential' and thus who is deserving of support to access institutions. The symbolism of exam grades as a marker of potential as being a key example of how institutional doxa, especially in elite institutions, shapes who is seen as a suitable student for their institution. Moreover, recent proposals in England to limit access to student funding based on minimum A-level grades further embeds these ideas into the structural barriers faced by those individuals who do not fit the doxic assumptions of a 'potential' student and thus no amount of local resistance is likely to help improve access to those who would and should be its beneficiaries. In order to affect change, these assumptions need to be deconstructed otherwise all individuals will ever be able to do is to make small dents on the margins in relation of the inequities of access.

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## Notes

1. Subsequently called access agreements and since superseded by Access and Participation plans.
2. GCSEs are the exams taken by 16 year olds in England and Wales. Since 2017, GCSEs have moved to grading 9-1 with 9 being the A\* equivalent and representing the top grade achievable.
3. Since the study, RO now list five A\*-B (9-6) at GCSE as their entry requirement.
4. Eligible for free school meals in the past 6 years (an indicator of low income in England).

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